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Interviewer: Hi, I'm Bryon Hoerner, Curator of Collections from the Estes Park Museum. Today is Wednesday, April 30, 2014. We are here at the Estes Park Museum with local climber Bronson MacDonald for the Estes Valley Mountaineering Oral History Project, a joint project between the Estes Valley Library and the Estes Park Museum. [This interview is also available in video format, filmed by Brian Brown. The interview was transcribed by Tom Williams with assistance from Bryon Hoerner.

Ok, can you start out by giving us your full name please?

Bronson MacDonald: Hi, my name is Bronson Noel MacDonald. I live here in Estes Park, Colorado.

Interviewer: Were you born here in Estes Park?

Bronson MacDonald: No I wasn't. I'm from a small village seven miles north of Niagara Falls, New York, it's called Lewiston and Lewiston a cute little village right along the Niagara River. We'd look out and see Canada a mile away.

Interviewer: What brought you to Estes Park?

Bronson MacDonald: I lucked out. My mother moved to Estes Park the fall of my sophomore year of college. I went to Potsdam College in way upstate New York. She called me up, October 15th in 1991 and she's like, "Hey Bronson, I just moved to Estes Park, Colorado. Do you want to become a resident? I was just like, "Oh my gosh, yes!" It was like my dream came true. So I came out that following spring.

Interviewer: What was your first introduction to climbing?

Bronson MacDonald: So my first introduction to climbing was actually a month before my mother moved to Estes Park in the Adirondacks. I lived; Potsdam, New York is about an hour and a half away from the High Peak Region in the Adirondacks which is Adirondack State Park. It's a state park in northern New York State. I had three older brothers; they all had climbed before in the Adirondacks. I heard about it, I read a little about it in the late '80s, early '90s and I always wanted to go rock climbing. When I was a sophomore in college I saw this cute guy walking across campus, I knew he was a rock climber, I knew he was a climbing guide. I was like, "I want that, I'm going to get it." I also knew he didn't have a car and I had a car so I went up to him, introduced myself, and I said, "I want to learn to rock climb. I have a car and I can drive." So that was the start and from there we would go climbing fall semester. Oh gosh, we were climbing in the

Adirondacks three to five days a week. Then it got too cold to climb outside and I wasn't interested in ice climbing. There was one of the first climbing gyms about an hour and a half away from the Adirondacks in Glens Falls, New York. So we started going to this indoor climbing gym all winter and I was totally hooked. So I really didn't do a lot of school, I passed with good grades but I don't know how I managed.

Interviewer: So you said that you were interested in climbing before you actually had a chance to go. What was it that drew you to that? What sparked that interest initially?

Bronson MacDonald: Well, growing up along the Niagara River, there's a ton of boulders on the Canadian side and that area actually is a known bouldering area in Western New York and Southern Ontario. There's some different rock faces on the U.S. side that were taller and I didn't think of bouldering. I mean we used to scramble on these boulders just goofing around. Then the rock faces, they were maybe like fifty feet tall and I'd walk past them and I'd be like, "That's really cool, I want to experience climbing that." Then with just with my older brothers, they all lived with climbers, all the old time trad climbers of the Adirondacks that were putting up first ascents and trad climbing at the time. So as a little girl I would go visit my brothers and stay with them and meet all these climbers and hear about their stories and adventures. I was always so intrigued but never had the opportunity where I grew up until I went to college and I met this one guy.

Interviewer: How would you describe yourself as a climber?

Bronson MacDonald: Well, it's kind of funny to ask that. I thought a lot about that, I'm like, "How do I describe myself as a climber?" I kind of think I'm an average climber. I've been climbing for twenty three years. I have a traditional base of climbing where you place gear into cracks and you rope up and you have somebody following and taking the gear out, but I'm much more of a boulderer and a sport climber. Back in '91, that's what I started off with, was, my first day of climbing was top roping at a little crag in the Adirondacks and then the next day we did a five pitch route. It was a slab climb called Chapel Pond Slab. I remember going up it and I'm just like, "Aw, slab climbing, this is boring." Then the last pitch was vertical and that's what totally struck me, I was like, "This is climbing." Then the next day we went bouldering and then I totally fell in love with bouldering and like, "This is what I want to do." I'm definitely much more of a boulderer and sport climber.

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Interviewer: How would you explain bouldering to someone who is completely unfamiliar with climbing in general?

Bronson MacDonald: That's a good question. Bouldering to me it's, well bouldering is climbing a short span of rock and it's a very gymnastic like movement. It can be anywhere from very less than vertical, so that would be a slab climb which there's big boulders that you will see that are less than vertical. So it's a very delicate, it's like flowing dancing movements, to way over hung roofs. So it's kind of to me like the purest form of climbing because you don't have ropes or harnesses. It's just you and the rock in a short span and you're trying to create a sequence to get from the bottom to the top and finish it all in one go. So it's a very gymnastic like movement.

Interviewer: How is that different than like more traditional climbs or sport climbs?

Bronson MacDonald: Well it's different because you really are not getting high off the ground. You might get anywhere from five feet to, you can get twenty feet off the ground. But you're never up super high so like trad climbing you will have a harness and a rope and gear and you might get up 1,000 feet and you have a climbing partner that's following and cleaning your gear out of the cracks. Sport climbing is usually a single pitch so it's maybe anywhere from fifty feet to eighty feet long, maybe one hundred feet long, but in a sense half a rope length where there's permanent protection on the rock and then you clip into the permanent protection on the rock and then clip the rope that's attached to you and your harness in that. So bouldering is just you and the rock. If you go with a climbing partner, you have somebody there spotting you, like when you learn a gymnastic movement if you're a gymnast. The spotter then, if you fall helps direct you to a crash pad. So you do have a piece of gear, you have like a big foam mat that's maybe six inches thick underneath of where you're bouldering so you don't land on the rocks or land on your butt on the dirt. Just helps prevent future injuries as you get older.

Interviewer: What was your first introduction to climbing in the Estes Park area?

Bronson MacDonald: That is a good story. So I moved to Estes Park in spring of '92 and I was 19 years old. Estes Park is definitely a traditional base, because we have the Rocky Mountain National Park, I mean we have huge rock faces. The climbing community here is a lot of guys, there's not very many women. In 1992 there definitely were not very many women here. So I moved to town and I was working at a coffee house behind MacDonald Bookstore, it was then MacDonald Coffee and Paper and my mom also worked there. She knew I was having a hard time finding climbing partners and I was kind of shy and I didn't really, I just didn't want to go up to people and be like, "Hey, I'm a totally beginner rock climber, will you take me climbing?" So she met these two guys, one guy was named Bret and the other was a local climber, Jim Hurst who doesn't live here anymore but he's put up a lot of different things in this area. She went up to them and said, "Hey, my daughter, she's a climber and she's looking for climbing partners." So funny because she said, "Yeah, my daughter climbs 5.13," and these guys are like, "Wow, yeah we want to climb with her!" I'm a

total beginner, I mean I climbed for maybe eight months before that but it was very little. I'd done one trad climb at that point and I knew how to do basic things. So we exchanged phone numbers and they got in touch with me and it was so cute because Jim, after he started communicating with my mom about how what my levels are, what I've done, he realized, he was like, "Wow this mom has no idea of what she's talking about, but she's nineteen, she's a cute girl, I'll be interested." So we met up and it was great because he became one of my climbing partners for a couple of years and from there he introduced me to. We'd climb at Lumpy Ridge five, six, seven days a week and then it was cool because I mentioned to him that I really liked bouldering and he was getting into bouldering in different areas in the Park. He mentioned this one area up in the Park at Emerald Lake, it's Emerald Lake Boulders. So we would start going up there and exploring and developing that bouldering area and a good friend of mine from high school, he knew I moved here so he called up my mom, asked if he could crash in her driveway in his V.W. van. So us three would all just end up going up to the Park and going bouldering. It was nice because it was just like a couple locals and I met one girl who kind of liked to climb but it was kind of quiet and tough to meet a lot of climbers when I first moved here.

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Interviewer: So then you met up with these couple of local guys and kind of got in with them. They started showing you around. Were there other climbers at that time that you ran into that mentored you as well, or that were regular climbing partners?

Bronson MacDonald: Well, not necessarily locals. I mean there was Lawrence Stumpke who doesn't live here anymore, he has put up a ton of sport routes in this area, he worked for Colorado Mountain School back in the '90s. I met him and that was kind of it. Jim Hurst, Lawrence Stumpke and then my friend Michael Lorenti who was from high school and he moved out here. It was like of like us and then there was people immigrating in and out for the next couple of seasons. Then the guy that actually taught me how to climb in the Adirondacks, he was living in Oregon that summer and we kept in touch he actually moved to Estes Park and he became one of the people in the climbing community. Jim Belcer is his name and he was definitely my main mentor. He has done a huge development of bouldering in this area. But it was pretty quiet, I definitely met Mike Caldwell and his son Tommy, and Tommy at that point was I think thirteen. So as a nineteen year old I didn't really hang out with thirteen year olds very often. I knew Tommy and he would come bouldering as he got older with the little group of us, but it was still really quiet. I knew of like Tim Hansen and Steve Komito and Doug Snively. I knew of all these great legends of the area that are I'd say about fifteen, twenty years older than me but I didn't really ever climb with any of them. I just climbed with a couple of people.

But slowly more people started moving here and the climbing community started getting a little bit bigger and that helped a lot to meet more people.

Interviewer: Were there some climbers that you maybe never met or didn't get to climb with that you kind of looked up to or were inspired by?

Bronson MacDonald: Oh, definitely. You know, climbers get totally hooked on rating climbing on rock and ice. We're all like junkies reading this. I became inspired by Lynn Hill and Bobbi Bensman. Those two women were in the '80s and '90s and Catherine Destivelle, she's a French woman and then Robin Ebersfield, she was originally from Georgia, but all those women, except for Catherine, they all live in Boulder. They definitely were like my heroes and idols in the women's scene because they were doing things that I couldn't even imagine. Eventually I met those women and I guess it would have been two years after I started climbing; I met Bobby down at Hueco Tanks State Park which is outside of El Paso, Texas and that's a world renowned bouldering area. And became friends with her and started bouldering with this woman who is just amazingly strong. So definitely those women were my heroes and I'd read about them in the magazines. The climbing community is like any little outdoor group, there's pilots, there's fly fisher people or fishermen and cyclists all have little communities. And eventually start getting to know everybody. It's pretty neat when you start meeting your heroes. But also just reading about all the top climbers back in the '90s like the competition climbers and like Jim Karn and oh my gosh, and Jason Karn, they lived in Oregon and did things in Smith Rock, Oregon. There's just a whole list that you're like, "Wow, I want to meet them all one day," that were very inspiring.

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Interviewer: How would you describe your progression as a climber from your very first day out as a beginner to kind of where you're at now?

Bronson MacDonald: That pretty cool. I'm a lot stronger; I have a lot more technique. The progression is, there's still the same drive and passion and desire and love for climbing. That progression hasn't changed. Like the minute I touched rock when actually I was eighteen and from trad climbing to top roping and then bouldering has still stayed the same as today. Physically the progression has just expanded immensely; I mean the training scene from the early '90s to the present day is so drastically more excelled. Learning how to prevent injuries, how to become a better climber with using the useful tools of indoor climbing gyms and modifying different lifting techniques. So the progression is, my love stayed the same but I definitely got stronger, stronger lead head, not a scared about taking falls when you're leading with a rope. That's a wonderful progression, not being scared. But the progression, still just physically stronger.

Interviewer: What is it about climbing that still keeps you excited two decades into it? Is there any one thing you can put your finger on?

Bronson MacDonald: No there's not one thing. I think it realistically is, it's the whole scenario of being outdoors, the freedom of movement on rock. Even driving by, like driving up right now Route Seven, you look at all the rock. There's so much rock out there that you're just like, "I want to go touch it." Even like if you see a little boulder on the side of the road that is maybe like ten feet tall, you're like, "Woo, I wonder if there's something there?" It encompasses everything, the adventure, the traveling, going to new places in the world to see different climbing areas. The community of climbers is so diverse and warm and hospitable that no matter where you go you will always meet wonderful people that totally bring you in. They'll be like, "Yeah, let's go bouldering; let's go sport climbing or trad climbing." Anywhere you go in the world, when you go into a climbing community, that local climbing community, they're always warm and welcoming. So it's everything about climbing.

Interviewer: What are some of your favorite areas to climb here in Estes Park?

Bronson MacDonald: That's a good one. Estes Park area is, it's pretty diverse in the types, the styles of climbing. The rock is primarily all granite, but there's different types of granite. I would have to say that Emerald Lake Boulders is probably one of my favorite areas. It's kind of neat because different seasons I prefer different climbing areas more than others. Like beginning of the season to get back into, after the winter getting back into shape maybe go to Wild Basin, boulder Box Care Boulder and it's just a single boulder, it's a great place to go by yourself if you don't have a partner cause it's all flat landing. And going up to Lumpy Ridge, except for this winter because it was pretty heavy winter, you can boulder there all winter. You can even trad climb there in the winter time because it's all south facing. Lumpy Ridge is kind of like the old staple where you want to hone your technique and really tear up your skin, get it beefy. You go to Lumpy Ridge, it is so crystally and it kills your skin. Then there's, and then there's neat because there's so many other area that keep getting developed like Elk Land area just right off of [Highway] 34. It's in the Park but you park off of Route 34 and you hike in. Beautiful boulders and people have gone there maybe thirty years ago; twenty years ago and now it's getting more developed. I mean there's places down 34, like Mary's Bust is a really fun place to go sport climbing and easy access. So I guess for me it really depends on the time of the year and what my focus is.

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But Emerald Lake is really really special.

Interviewer: Have you had a hand in some of the bouldering development in the area?

Bronson MacDonald: Just a little. I guess the primary thing that I had a hand in was carrying crash pads in with the guys that were doing all the first assents, all the hard first assents. I've done a few easy first assents like lower grades and exploring and trying to define new areas. I'm always, like in the '90s I was always out there with the guys, all the guys doing all the developing. I didn't put up a lot, just a few boulder problems. And then sport and trad routes, I just repeated at all the classics that have been put up, not all of them but a lot of them. I wish I could repeat all of them. My influence is just a little bit. I was a nice girl that hung out with all the guys that was always warm and hospitable to everybody.

Interviewer: What was it like hanging out with the guys trying to develop new bouldering areas? Did sometimes people have an idea and "Let's go hike in this direction?" Or was it more haphazard?

Bronson MacDonald: I would have to say it's a little bit more haphazard, because definitely you know we would all go exploring, hike up to Chasm Lake. People would be climbing the Diamond and then hiking into Hallett's Peak. Actually it's kind of neat because you, all the trad climbs are all these big stones and you're going to pass boulderers so it was like a lot of word of mouth. Emerald Lake Boulders that was probably all the old timers, all the first people that climbed Hallett's. They all saw the boulders a little bit but they never went and developed them because bouldering is much more classified as something to do on your rest day, it's not something you do on a great climbing day when you're fresh. All the old timers were like, "Aw yeah, bouldering you know it's just like something you goof around with." But then it's developed into this whole new, it's its own sport in a sense. So a lot of times you just go hiking, exploring and looking at topographical maps, you're just like, "You know, there has to be a bunch of boulders in this area." And a lot of times you just luck out. Sometimes you're like, "Wow, this is really cruddy rock." Other times you're just like, "This is bomber rock, why haven't we ever seen this before?" So it's just a lot of exploring, taking the initiative.

Interviewer: How would you describe the climbing community here in Estes Park both when you first arrived and today?

Bronson MacDonald: It is a lot different today. Back in the early '90s it was a very small group. There weren't a lot of younger generation people moving here to go climbing. A lot of them, they all lived in Boulder or Ft. Collins. People would travel and pass through but the ones living in Estes Park were like, I mean it was a great group of all the local old timers in a sense. With the progression of sport climbing developing and bouldering, people suddenly realized how great this area is. So definitely at first there was, I noticed

when I moved here with being so in love with bouldering, a lot of them were just like, "Aw bouldering." They would put down boulderers, a lot of people did. It continued to be like that for a long time, I mean some of the hardest boulder problems in the country were getting set here in this area. This area is a world renowned bouldering location with Emerald Lake, Lake Haiyaha which is also Chaos Canyon. Things at Lumpy Ridge that were going up that were just extremely difficult. Some boulder problems have only seen a couple of assents and those went up in the early '90s. So it was interesting to see the whole progression of how a lot of people, local climbers were kind of, they turned their nose to you and you'd say, "Yeah, I want to go bouldering, you want to go bouldering?" There're like, "Psst, no I'm going to go rope up." Nothing wrong with any of that, it's all climbing, but today the climbing community here is I think a lot more open to all forms of climbers. It's a lot more diverse. There's climbers here that only boulder, there's climbers here that only trad climb; there's some climbers that only sport climb. Then there's some of them that do everything and intermix and ice climb and mountaineer and alpine climb. So today I feel like it's a lot more welcoming and communal and easier to find climbing partners. Still really hard sometimes, especially if you're a new person, to find climbing partners but it's getting a lot easier.

05:19

Interviewer: What about female climbers in the area? More now?

Bronson MacDonald: Oh yeah, there's a lot more now. It's kind of neat. So my best friend Melissa Strong, she started climbing here, I moved away for a few years and after I moved away she started climbing then I moved back. She started off trad climbing and now primarily only boulders. It was wonderful because when I moved back I was just like, "My gosh I have a great girlfriend to go bouldering with." And I've always climbed with guys and a few girls here and there. Today there's Melissa, me, my friend Quinn Bret who is an all-around climber. She likes to trad climb, sport climb, boulder, pretty much trad climb primarily. And then there's some girls that come and go like our friend Karla [Dubois], she'll sometimes climb then she'll go for a few years without, off the couch she'll just like, "Oh yeah, I'll go do that." So today there's a lot more women. The younger generation of girl climbers is definitely growing but a lot of them are "gym rats" and it takes them a few years to get outside and find the passion for it. But overall there's definitely a lot more and then there's a lot of girls, the climbing community for women has grown so much with the accessibility of climbing gyms and there's a ton of women from Boulder and Ft. Collins, Golden, Denver, etc. that are good friends with a bunch of us up here. So they come up and we all boulder. So you might be hiking up to Emerald Lake or to Lake Haiyaha to Chaos Canyon and you'll see a group of girls with crash pads on their backs all going bouldering. Not a single guy with them and it's so nice to have that

opportunity. Whereas twenty two years ago there'd be me and Jean Gordon. Jean Gordon's actually a park ranger I think for the National Forest, Roosevelt National Forest. But it was pretty much her and I. And then there definitely was older women that climbed but didn't interact as much with the younger generation. So I think that's definitely changing a lot, it's nice that there's a ton more women and girls of all different age groups that are climbing together.

Interviewer: Do you think climbing with primarily the guys had a significant impact on how you progressed as a climber or maybe some of the things that you did or tried?

Bronson MacDonald: Definitely, I think so. Watching them be much more dynamic, excelling. Men of course have a lot more upper body strength than women and my main climbing partner, Jim Belcer; he always focused on amazing technique foot work. If you have great footwork you will be able to do anything. Your upper body will get strong and eventually you will be able to become more dynamic and have more power. But watching men climb, especially the really talented men, that the overall technique was brilliant. It gave you an insight like, "I could do that, I can try that, I want to try that." And also men don't have, most men don't have fear where a lot of women, I think it's just innate in women to have a little bit more fear because you're the ones who are supposed to have babies and kids and you always are like, "Oh, well we've got to be careful you know." So hanging out with the guys makes you a little bit more aggressive, like, "I'm going to try harder." That definitely today, women climbers, the younger generation like teenagers and girls in their early twenties, are so much more aggressive. So that's a progression I think, women from the '80s and '90s are to today slowly like they have become way more dynamic, powerful and just realizing, "I can climb just like a guy, I can climb just as hard as a guy." And all the guys that I've ever climbed with, the neat thing about them is, I mean some of them were some of the best boulderers in that time period in the country and they were just like, "Of course you can try this." The only way to get stronger is get on these hard boulder problems. So it's nice to have that influenced.

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Interviewer: Do you have some specific goals or projects that you've kind of set for yourself over your time climbing and that you were really excited that you achieved them?

Bronson MacDonald: Definitely. I still have goals that I still haven't achieved. It's funny I always had a goal when I was younger. The big goal is not to get injured, so I slowly progressed with through the grades. And then during different time periods in your life you may have different things where you can't train as hard, you won't be climbing as hard. You just plateau, which is normal I think in any athletic endeavor. I always had a goal that, "Ok, by

the time I turn forty I'll finally climb my first 5.13." So I put that pressure on myself the summer before I turned forty. And different life events happened so I wasn't able to. And it's just like, "Well you know I'm still in my forty's, I still could achieve that goal." So definitely I have the goal to achieve is to climb some beautiful 5.13 sport routes and to boulder V10. And the cool thing is, I mean I work full time and I have other projects that I'm doing in life that will end up leading to a different career for me that I've always wanted to do. So you kind of sometimes have to put something on to the back burner and climbing you know, it's slowed down a little bit right now. But once you become passionate about something it will never leave you. So I have a couple more months where I have to really focus on another thing and then I do have a climbing wall in my house, in my living room so it's kind of nice because I could always be training and stay strong. But the goals are still to always keep doing new stuff that I've never done before at all different grades and keep pushing myself to get to harder stuff.

Interviewer: Do you have a story of a specific climb that you did that you are especially proud of?

Bronson MacDonald: Oh, that's, I like that. You know, I'll keep it local because I've traveled all over the world for climbing and have really neat experiences in different areas. The local, probably my most significant experience, and it's not technically the hardest thing I've ever done locally, but memorable experience was on Twin Owls on the east side is a little place called Hidden Chickens and there's a route there called Heavy Cure. And it's this beautiful line, there's a couple fixed pitons and it's just a single pitch, it's maybe fifty feet tall, it's not very tall. But I've top roped it ton and it's a trad line and it's little gear, it's run out a little, it's kind of spicy, it's very spicy. I've always wanted to lead it, I had it wired on top rope and I was just like, "Woo, do I do it?" So I would try leading it and then I'd fallen on a couple pieces and I was just like, "Ok, no I'm not ready yet." So I hadn't been able to do it from the bottom to the top yet and then one day I was just like, "You know what," I didn't have a climbing partner, I knew how to hike around back and set up a top rope on the top. Like, "I'm just going to rope solo this." I talked to a couple of friends because I never had rope soloed before. I was just like, "Ok, I'm going up by myself." At this point I had already climbed going on like eighteen years, or no maybe like fifteen years, so "Should be able to figure this out, I'm experienced, I know all the safety measures." So I went out there and I set up the anchors, made sure everything was balanced properly, super strong. I think I had like eight pieces in for my anchor because I'm like, "I don't want anything to fall out, I want this to be solid." Then I fixed a line and tied it off so it was static, I had a dynamic rope but still it was like taunt so I could just make sure everything is fine. So I tied off one end and then I had a grigri hooked up to my harness, which is not technically the safest way to rope solo but it can work. I rope soloed it with no falls and I was

just like, “Ok, I can do this.” And that was more scary than leading it because it was just me trying to figure out all the equipment and you’re double checking everything, there’s slack, you’re pulling up. And you’re in a weird positions, pulling up slack through your grigri so if you fall you only fall like a foot. And after that I was like, “Ok, I can go do this.” So the next week a friend and I, we went out, she put me on belay and I led it, fell once, came down, was like, “Ok, let me just chill out for a second,” and then I assent it. Assent it meaning I red pointed it with no falls and that route was, it was just beautiful. It was kind of like, “Really, did I just do this?” Then that’s just in our back yard, so that’s the most memorable.

15:25

Interviewer: So you’ve been climbing for a while now, how have you seen the sport in general kind of change over that time?

Bronson MacDonald: Well, definitely there’s a lot more people, the climbing community is huge and that would have to be with the opening of gyms. I think there’s a gym in every city now, even small little rural cities, somebody will have a little climbing wall somewhere. So with the accessibility of people getting into gym climbing that then leads to people wanting to go outside and try outdoor climbing. There is quite a bit of difference, because gym climbing, technically it’s a lot more safe than outdoor. Everything is obvious; the routes are all labeled with tape mark. It’s a much more controlled environment. So with that the climbing world and community has grown a lot. Then you’ll have the people that are interested, they want to learn more. They might go with a group or be guided outdoors and then they fall in love with that and then they start learning how to climb outdoors. So with the trad world and sport climbing world that hasn’t has progressed as fast as the bouldering world because bouldering is a lot more feasible and accessible, also financially easier to do because you have a crash pad, shoes and a chalk bag. You don’t have to have a harness and your rack and ropes and everything. So that definitely has become a lot more populated. The attitude towards climbing I think has always been positive but the younger generation today seems a lot more communal and supportive of one another. Also, climbing difficulties continuously grow because you know back in the ‘70s, 5.11 was really hard, 5.12’s. The guys back then were so strong and they were putting up hard stuff not really realizing. Then it continues to grow and grow, people see, they can visualize a blank face. They’re like, “Oh, there’s three holds there; of course I can climb that.” It’s just, the vision continues to grow and get bigger. So that’s just going to lead to more areas getting developed and the climbing population continues to grow because it’s just more accessible.

Interviewer: Can you talk a little bit more about the difference between climbing indoors verses climbing outdoors? You mentioned how everything’s more obvious in a gym. Could you expand on that a little bit?

Bronson MacDonald: Well in the gym world, it's kind of like called plastic, all the holds that are bolted onto the wall, they're a form of plastic climbing holds. A person can put up a route in a gym with specific shape, size, climbing holds to create a specific level or difficulty of climbing. From everything from 5.0 to 5.14. Then bouldering indoors also you can have from V0 or V0 minus to V12, 13, 14. So it's, the indoor climbing world is very like much more manufactured construction. You can go up to a wall and you see all the holds and then there will be different colored pieces of tape that mark the route that you are going to climb at that specific level. So say

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you go up to the wall and there's a bunch of yellow tape all by these holds and let's just say that's 5.8 or a 5.10 or a 5.12 route. You think, "Oh today I want to climb 5.10," so you just go and you do that route. So with that, the indoor climbing, it's kind of like a grid in a sense, you're like, "Oh, ok, I can just go do that and that." It makes sense. So climbers who start in the gym, everything is so visual with colors and that when they go outside, I mean real rock doesn't have little pieces of tape anywhere and you have to find your own holds. Indoor climbing is pretty neat; it's definitely its own little world. A lot of climbers only climb indoors and never go outdoors. Indoor climbing also has a huge competition scene and that's world renowned, you have from the youth division to the masters and it's pretty because it gives lots of people opportunities of all different levels of climbing to be able to compete, to climb indoors. Also indoor climbing gyms are everywhere in the world today.

Interviewer: Speaking of competitions, you've had some involvement with our local climbing team, yeah? What was that like, working with the younger generation and those kids that probably started climbing indoors?

Bronson MacDonald: It was a lot of fun, first of all. I first started part part time with some of the local coaches. One woman, Michelle Hurni, she ran the climbing program and Stephen Greenway ran the climbing program here at our local gym, the Estes Park Mountain Shop. They've had, it's really neat, they've had world renowned climbers come out of their climbing team, like Tommy Caldwell and Paige Claassen. They're the best climbers, some of the best climbers in the world. So helping out with them part time coaching was a lot of fun with the head coaches and coaching with the younger kids and watching them climb, teaching them how to move. It was really neat to see the progression that these kids had this opportunity to go climbing; they have an opportunity to learn. That didn't really exist, definitely didn't exist to climb indoors in the '80s, started in the early '90s. So with my involvement in it, it was just fun to watch the amazement the kids had

when they were just like, “Wow, I can figure this move out.” They would be daring, some would be much more timid than others. Then eventually for one year I was a full time coach, I took over with the team and at that time period, the comp circuit. So there’s this thing called the U.S.A. Climbing, it’s this huge national comp circuit with different climbing teams. There was regions. In a sense it’s just like all the other team sports that we have, soccer, you have traveling soccer teams, leagues and etc. The climbing world for the youth has grown so much that that’s now the kid’s main sport, is climbing. Instead of going and doing a bunch of team sports they’re on a climbing team. The local climbing team was very interesting because these kids go to a small school. All the coaches at the high school and the middle school are trying to get them to do track, soccer, football, basketball, volleyball, baseball, soft ball. These poor kids are being like pulled every different direction. There was only a few kids on the climbing team that just did climbing, which is good to be multi-sport kids but there was some that realized, “I just want to climb.” So those kids on the climbing team, those were the ones that go to the local climbing competitions and then a lot of them made it to divisionals, nationals, and some of them made it to worlds. So it’s really neat to see, there’s a very select crew that wanted to just to focus on climbing. Then you had other kids of other abilities that wanted to experience of climbing but not necessarily have it become their main sport and push it. So when I was a coach for a year, the USA Climbing, the kids throughout the entire country are strong climbers. So the competition scene is getting way more competitive and stronger. I mean you have kids that are competing in; they’re on-siding 5.13, that’s their warm-up. It was hard to have the kids at our local area who are so, there going to be pulled all over the place. You know go into competitions and excel and do, there’s only a few that always will excel so it was interesting to watch that and see how much the progression of the climbing competition scene that’s changed.

05:13

So the local climbing team, we had it where there’d be kids that just wanted to do it as like a fun thing, rec [recreation], and then some that wanted to train. I kind of feel guilty because I come from a, I grew up playing soccer and we were one of the best in our state. So I grew up from a pretty strict training background that I expected all the kids on the climbing team, like, “You’re going to train hard, if you want to be on this team, this is what is expected out of you. You have to try; I want to see you try. I’m not here to baby you.” So I feel like I’m, “Oh my god, I’m like my soccer coach.” I was kind of mean and brutal at times. We would warm up and make them go run and they’re just like, “We have to run before climbing?” Like, “Yeah, you guys are going to be, we need to warm up well and you need to be physically active. You need get the juices flowing.” So I’d go running with them and I’m like, “If I beat any of you, you’re doing this again.” [chuckles] So it was interesting to see

how much the climbing kid scene has changed where it's so much more competitive and you can't expect that out of every kid. It was kind of hard for me to find a balance but I loved working with all the kids because they were all there because they wanted to climb and they loved it. The ones that just were like, "Yeah, I don't care about climbing, 5.5, that's fine. I just wanted to have fun, make it to the top or do a couple of moves on a boulder problem." It was neat to see that they were trying and then it was really neat to see the kids who became so passionate about it that they would ask, "How else can I become a better climber? What do I need to do?" In today's climbing world, climbers are cross training, so I had the kids go to local kid's cross fit, which we have a great kid's cross fit program here. Because they need to be balanced, they need to work all the opposing muscles and prevent injuries. So it was really neat to help them explore and see that they can always be a climber, no matter what level they're at, the rest of their lives. The ones that, if they want to get super strong and be competitive, this is the next level they need to go to. It's sad to say though that the climbing team, the elite climbing team doesn't exist. There is an after school program, which is nice that that still exists for the local kids, whoever wants to get into it.

Interviewer:

So I guess recently, I'm not sure how recently, there was a bit of discussion about a local bouldering area that was sort of a local spot and then it got publicized online on one of the forums. Were you involved in that at all or can you speak to kind of the differences of opinions that climbers have about that sort of stuff?

Bronson MacDonald: You know it's interesting that you mention this because this has been happening ever since bouldering has become so much more popular. This happened back in the '90s with different areas getting developed. Today with the internet it can become national news throughout all the different forums, it can become a huge topic and much more known in the public, in the media. So in a sense it's nothing new but I know of a couple different events that have been happening in the past, really it's been, let's see I moved back here in 2002, I had a short stint away, so in the past gosh, the past twelve years, I mean there's been some different areas that have become a lot more popular. Then we have people from Japan and Europe and South Africa, like world renowned climbers coming here. Then we have a ton of people from the Front Range coming up here to boulder. So I can't really speak specifically about the forums because it's been happening for a long time and there's always going to be this controversy. It's controversy of access that these boulderers are going to ruin the access for other boulderers or local boulderers to their area. Nobody owns any bouldering area, which cracks me up, like, "You guys this is a National Park, or this is a National Forest, this is BLM, this is State, this is my backyard, whatever." It should be all open and shared and I think a lot of the times people forget. We need to educate each other to respect the land, don't go off trail, don't be stupid.

People are always going to try to bend the rules a little bit. If you bend the rules, fine but just don't get caught. I mean that's the biggest thing and it's the one's that get caught that ruin it for everybody else. A lot of times I think a lot of the problems are people are leaving crash pads places. People will even forget their crash pads. If you are going to do anything that's against the rules, then you do your hardest to make sure nobody ever finds out. That's like anything in life, if you're going to break some rules, you get away with it. I know a lot of locals were annoyed with even people from Boulder and Ft. Collins coming up to different bouldering areas. But we go down there to their bouldering areas, so it's just stupid I think how pissed off people get. They're like, "This is my boulder." It's like, "No it's not, we've got to all share, just make sure you just then communicate and be friendly and let's make sure we respect the trails, the land, the Park, the rangers, the locals. Communicate with everybody so we can keep the access, that's the biggest thing." Because the minute you have all these forums going and controversy, the Park can just say, "You know what, screw you guys, we're going to shut this down." So we just all have to make sure we communicate well and keep the access. So I think that's going to be a controversy as long as people are climbing. It happens also with sport climbing areas and trad areas. There are people who always want to find the shortest distance to get to areas too if it's off trail. We just have to make sure as climbers in the climbing community to educate everyone that this is what's happening, do not leave this trail because you don't want to mess it up for other people in the future or next week or whenever. So that's kind of my opinion on that whole forum scene.

Interviewer: It's interesting because it seems like every few years there's a big disagreement about something and then people sort of figure it out and the sport progresses and then something else comes up and it gets figured out and then it progresses and so it's really interesting looking at the time line of things that we've been looking at and this seems to be one of the latest ones.

Bronson MacDonald: Yes, I try to stay away from all those forums, I'm just like, "Ah, goodness you guys." It's going to happen in twenty years from now too.

Interviewer: If you were limited to one area that you were allowed to climb for the rest of your life, where would it be?

Bronson MacDonald: Anywhere in the world?

Interviewer: Any local area, yeah, if you were somehow restricted to one of the local spots, which one would it be?

Bronson MacDonald: One of the local spots. Wow, well thankfully I can say at the Rocky Mountain National Park. It has a lot, and that's one designated area, the Rocky Mountain National Park. But if you have to be much more specific like one little area, that's a tough one because there's so many cool places. If I had to continuously just, that was like my one boulder, I guess I would have to say Emerald Lake. The bouldering, I mean it's just beautiful and it's like a little cluster of boulders all together and it's fun, it's diverse and beautiful scenery and you have water right there that's really cold. Yeah, I'd have to say probably Emerald Lake Boulders.

13:49

Interviewer: Do you have any other stories or experiences of climbing in the area that you want to share with us?

Bronson MacDonald: Well, gosh there's so many good stories. I mean there's so many fun times thinking of hooking with just different friends and daily just being goof balls and silly. I guess you caught me off guard a little bit because there's so many stories. I mean I can think of some stories that the public shouldn't probably know about like [chuckles] hiking up, well I'll tell you anyways but you guys can edit this. But it's always entertaining hiking up to Emerald Lake or Lake Haiyaha, Chaos Canyon, with your crash pads on your back and all the tourists are like, "Wow, what are those?" Especially the tourists back in the '90's. Today a lot of tourists are like, "Woo, Those are bouldering crash pads." And we are like, "Yes, it is." But back in the '90s people are like, "Wow, what are those things? Are you camping?" You know the crash pads, I'm only 5.3" so a lot of times the crash pads are like 4' by 3' and that's almost like my height. And they go like, "Woo, what are you doing?" I'm just like, "Oh, actually it's a pop-up tent; we're just going to go up and pop it up." They're like, "Really, that is so cool." You're like, "Yeah, yeah, it's a heavy pop-up tent." Like I'm going to carry this if I was going back packing. Or be like, "Oh, it's a raft, we're just going floating." A lot of times we'd always tell people, we're like, "Oh yeah, you know it's a Rocky Mountain humping pad." They're like, "What?" "We're going up to film a porno and this is the pad we film the porno on." It's great because then they're just like, "Oh, ok." [chuckles] It's so sad, sometimes you just get kind of, you never know what's going to pop out of whose mouth. A lot of the times just hanging with all your friends and being silly and telling stories to one another and entertaining the tourists. Those are a lot of the most fun times and going up to. It's pretty neat back, I remember my first summer here in 1992 going up to Emerald Lake with Jim Hurst and Michael Lorenti and a few other people and we're bouldering and just trying these boulder problems and they were just so hard, today they're like a piece of cake, they're super easy warm ups for people. I mean the level has progressed so much. But it was just so much fun like we'd go up there and we're the first people to really boulder in this one bouldering area. We're walking up there and people

are just looking at you like, “What do you have on your back, why are you going that way, the lake is this way.” We’re like, “Oh, we’re just going to go check out some big rocks,” and people don’t really understand. “You mean you’re not going to that big rock to climb Hallett’s Peak?” “No, we’re only climbing something that’s only ten feet tall.” Just hanging out up there, sunbathing, bouldering, it’s all integrated together as just one big huge experience. Gosh, I mean I’d have to sit here for a while and think about some really really good stories. But just all the moments.

Interviewer: What is it like to know that you were one of the first people to explore some of those boulders and now there’s so many other people that are getting that similar experience?

Bronson MacDonald: That’s kind of neat that you say it that way because it’s kind of like every boulder, even if it has boulder problems on it that people have done, if it’s your first time there, it’s a brand new boulder problem. It’s a new experience to each person every single time. And to go there may be back in the ‘60s there were some different people that actually bouldered at Emerald Lake and put up all these boulder problems but never wrote about it, never publicized it. Maybe it’s already been done, but I believe after talking to a lot of locals, we were the first ones in this one area. It’s a neat experience because you know that you are contributing to the bouldering history. You’re experiencing something that nobody’s ever really touched before. You’re cleaning the rock with maybe like a toothbrush because there’s dirt on it; you always want to make sure that you clean things not to damage the rock but to make sure that you can grab a little edge. Then you sit down and maybe you work it and work it meaning it’s a sit down start and you’re on the first hold and you reach up to the next hold and then you fall. And then you try it again and your feet are on some little tiny edge and then finally you figure out a few more moves and then you figure it out from the bottom to the top and you don’t fall. The experience to do that, it’s kind of mind blowing. It’s like the first time you learn to ride a bicycle and you are just like, “Oh my gosh, I don’t have training wheels, I’m riding a bicycle, I’m going, I’m doing it.” It’s the same experience, it’s adrenaline rush but bouldering to me is not adrenaline like dangerous adrenaline like you know base jumping and stuff like that. That’s,

19:35 [End of Part C.]

[D].

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that’s a little crazy but that’s really cool too. But it’s the same rush that you are putting something up that other people are going to enjoy, they might not but usually they do. It’s the first time something went up as long as that you believe that it’s gone up. But you know that it might not have,

maybe in a couple of years, maybe people will forget about this one little boulder problem and somebody else comes back to it a couple of years later and there's no chalk on it and then they do it and it's kind of like that's their first time experience too of setting in a new boulder problem. When we would go to different areas, like there's a place down Route 34 called "The Beach" and it's seriously right next to the Big Thompson. You have to have crossed the Big Thompson, it's this one little rock overhang. It's about eight miles down, it is on private property so we always have tried to respect. The Beach, it was so cool like developing that and people would drive by and word gets out that you're developing a new area and there's hard boulder problems on it and you send it, you're just like, "Wow, I finally got that one." Or you go and check it out and you're like, "Is this worth checking out?" So it's like any new experience you have in life and then you're just contributing to the climbing history and you know that somebody else will always come and try it and hopefully they enjoy it as much as you. So I think that's my impression of why it's so cool to put up a few new things or be there when somebody puts up something new at any different level. Cause you're all contributing to the history.

Interviewer: Cool, I think that's all so thanks so much.

Bronson MacDonald: You're welcome, thank you so much, I appreciate it.

02:20 [End of Part D. End of Interview.]

Note: Added material appears in brackets.

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ABSTRACT: Long time Estes Park climber Bronson MacDonald first moved to the Estes Valley in 1992 and became one of a vanguard of women climbers in the area. Bronson describes her experience in all genres of climbing, her abiding love of natural rock and of bouldering and the challenges of solving boulder problems. She reflects upon her experience as a climbing coach. Bronson shares the rich friendliness of climbing communities located all over the world, the increasing cohesiveness of the local climbing community, and a diversity of different climbing ethics embraced by different members of the climbing community.

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